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ABSTRACT

Two California community colleges provided comparison data for a pilot study comparing basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in their progression through college English courses. The two colleges have different ESL populations, as well as different non-ESL populations. On the basis of demographic information and the complete transcript records from the district student information system, the authors assembled sets of basic skills student cohort databases. Using an SAS-based student tracking and research system, they investigated fundamental research questions about basic skills and ESL students: (1) Who are basic skills and ESL students? Are there clearly identifiable demographic and enrollment sub-group differences among them?; and (2) How do outcomes in basic skills courses affect the student pathways through the community college's English programs? The authors discuss the results of the pilot studies, as well as the tracking system and its applicability to institutional research. They developed a clearer picture of the different types of basic skills students, their academic aspirations, the barriers they face, what they actually accomplish, and how they go about it. They examined whether, and to what extent, basic skills instruction is a pathway to higher education for a large and growing number of community college students. (VWC)

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Retention, Persistence, Success: Where Do Basic Skills and ESL Students Fit in Current Accountability Models?

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Presented at Research and Planning Group Annual Conference[1]
Lake Arrowhead, California
April 1999

Two California community colleges, a large, urban college (College 1), and a smaller, more suburban college (College 2) provide comparison data for a pilot study comparing basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in their progression through college English courses. The two colleges involved have different ESL populations, as well as different non-ESL populations.

Both colleges are part of a large, urban community college district. On the basis of demographic information and the complete transcript records from the district student information system, we assemble sets of basic skills student cohort databases. Using a SAS-based student tracking and research system, which allows an extremely flexible and fine-grained pattern analysis of transcript records, we investigate fundamental research questions about basic skills and ESL students:

1) Who are basic skills and ESL students? Are there clearly identifiable demographic and enrollment sub-group differences among them?
2) How do outcomes in basic skills courses affect the student pathways through the community college's English programs?

It is often assumed that entering students should already be prepared to handle college level coursework and that they will pursue college coursework in traditionally assumed time frames and course-taking patterns. Little consideration is given to defining outcome measures for students who do not fit this model. And yet, the growing number of non-traditional students and recent calls for accountability, both, make it urgent to investigate outcomes in a more grounded and inclusive manner. We discuss the results of the pilot studies as well as the tracking system and its applicability to institutional research.

Our ongoing research into the careers and achievements of basic skills students is yielding two important results:

1) fundamental knowledge about basic skills and ESL students

and 2) a research model for students that can be applied to a broader consortium of institutions.

We are developing a clearer picture of the different types of basic skill students, their academic aspirations and the barriers they face, what they actually accomplish, and how they go about it. We examine whether and to what extent basic skills instruction is a pathway to higher education for a large and growing number of community college students.

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Thomas-Spiegel, Joan

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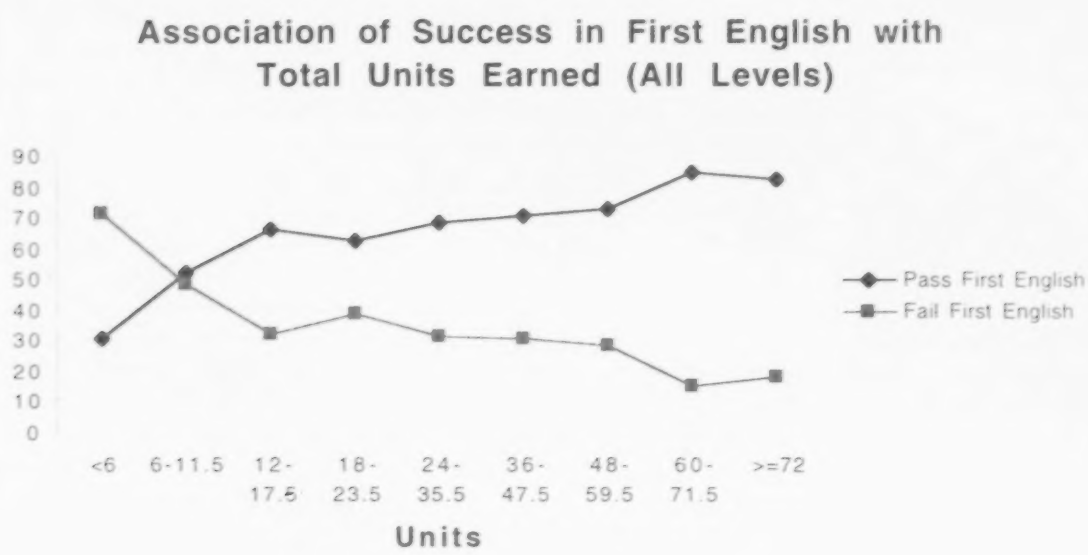
Why begin with English?

Community Colleges have increasingly sought to improve the basic skills of students to help them succeed with college work, especially in English and math. Figure 1 indicates the relationship between success and failure in the first English course at College 1 (at any level) and the number of units the student eventually completes. Clearly, students who succeed in their first English course at College 1 are much more likely to continue in their college career.

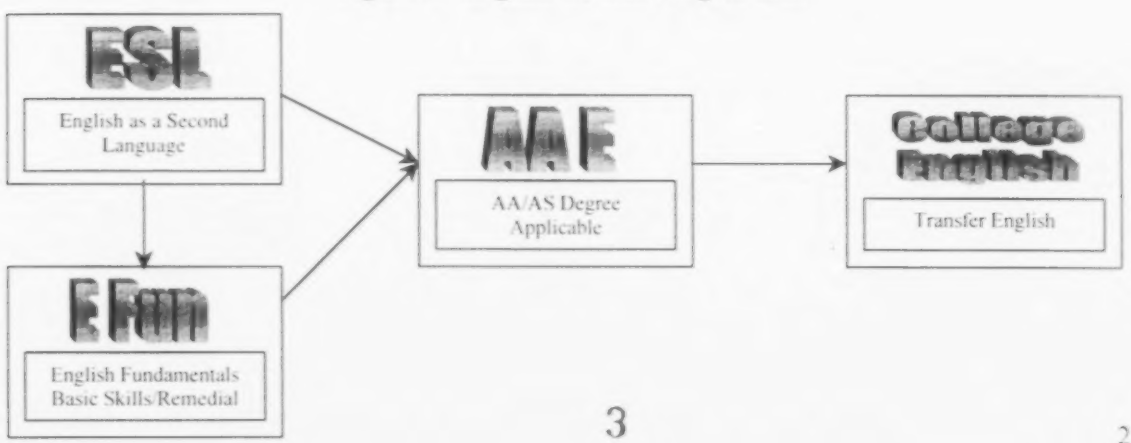
Figure 1. College 1 (n=7,259)



Are ESL students the problem?

At one college, educators complain that the college has become an ESL school. At another college, instructors comment that teaching students at basic skills levels in one semester what they have not learned in a lifetime is an overwhelming task. The data in this study determines the effectiveness of ESL English courses and basic skills English courses designed to prepare the student for college level English courses. Figure 2 displays the general progression of these students through AA-level English to College English level.

Figure 2. English Course Progression:



Partnership for Excellence and our college missions affirm that we must try to help students progress from whatever level they enter, whether they are ESL or non-ESL, through to successful completion of college level English and college level math. This study examines the progress of ESL and basic skills students through College English at two colleges.

Seventy-five percent (75%) of students attending College 1 indicate that a language other than English is their primary language, compared to 25% of students attending College 2. In other respects, the colleges are quite similar, with comparable ethnic breakdowns of approximately 25% white, 15% African-American, 20% Asian, and 40% Latino.

Table 1 indicates that students taking AA-English levels in the ESL only cohort (no history of a basic skills course), achieved higher grades than those coming from the prerequisite course of basic skills English ("English Fundamentals"), or those with both ESL and basic skills English courses previously completed. In addition, this group was more likely to pass the AA-English course.

Table 1. AA-English Outcomes of Fall 1994 Cohort Groups
Progress Tracking to Spring 1995 - Spring 1996

ESL only N=177	Cum Total Progressing to AA-E	Success Rate	Passing Success Rate (Original Cohort Pass=116)
Enroll	**54.2%** (96)	**42.4%**	**64.7%**
			GPA=2.79
E Fun only N=625			(Original Cohort Pass=366)
Enroll	**60.0%** (375)	**32.6%**	**55.7%**
			GPA=2.08
Both N=331			(Original Cohort Pass=233)
Enroll	**60.1%** (199)	**37.5%**	**53.2%**
			GPA=2.45

Similar results are shown in Table 2 for college English course outcomes. Students with ESL only backgrounds achieved a higher GPA than students with both ESL and English fundamentals (E Fun). The lowest achievers were the E Fun only students.

Table 2. College English Outcomes of Fall 1994 Cohort Groups
Progress Tracking to Spring 1995 - Spring 1997

ESL only N=177	Cum Total progressing to College English	Success Rate	Passing Success Rate (Original Cohort Pass=116)
Enroll	**19.8%** (35)	**14.7%**	**22.4%**
			GPA=3.04
E Fun only N=625			(Original Cohort Pass=366)
Enroll	**21.6%** (135)	**13.1%**	**22.4%**
			GPA=2.32
Both N=331			(Original Cohort Pass=233)
Enroll	**18.1%** (60)	**11.8%**	**16.7%**
			GPA=2.70

Persistence

Tables 1 and 2 also open a window to persistence. The persistence percentage of students progressing from ESL to AA-English is smaller than those coming from E Fun or both with a range of 6%. However, the percentages of students continuing into College English courses shift slightly to a range of 3.5% with ESL only students out-distancing the ESL and E Fun combined group. Persistence without a passing grade is far less useful measure than successful completion.

A Second Approach

The student cohorts for College 1 and College 2 were compared based on the same three cohorts discussed previously. However, in order to capture all students in AA-English, students were examined historically rather than progressively. All students taking AA-English during a one year period were placed into one of four cohorts: ESL only, E Fun only, Both (ESL and E Fun) and students with no previous English history at the colleges, who were labeled AA E placement.

This added cohort represented 47% of the students at College 1 and 71% at College 2 in the AA level English courses for that year. Although students were generally more successful as measured by GPA in the English course at College 1. The patterns at College 1 and College 2 were strikingly similar. The ESL only group received the highest grades, followed by the students placed in the course, the Both group, and finally, the E Fun group. Despite the differences in types of ESL populations, college size and location, the ESL students did best in AA English.

Table 3. AA Level English GPA and Percents by Cohort (Historical Tracking)

Instructional History:	College 1 % (N)	College 2 % (N)	College 1& 2 % of Total	College 1 AA E GPA	College 2 AA E GPA
AA E Placement	47%	71%	59%	2.74	2.31
ESL only	13%	04%	08%	2.76	2.66
E Fun only	30%	22%	26%	2.40	2.16
Both ESL & E Fun	10%	03%	06%	2.49	2.18
Total	100% (1164)	100% (1207)	100% (2371)	2.62	2.29

Retention

Figure 3 depicts the differences between each cohort with regard to grades (A, B, C vs. D, F, N) and with respect to withdrawals (W). Retention in the ESL history group was significantly better than for all other groups. Of special note is the equal likelihood of E Fun students and AA E placement students to withdraw. They had the highest rates of withdrawal compared to the ESL and Both cohorts.

Figure 3.

AA English Outcomes by Historical Cohort

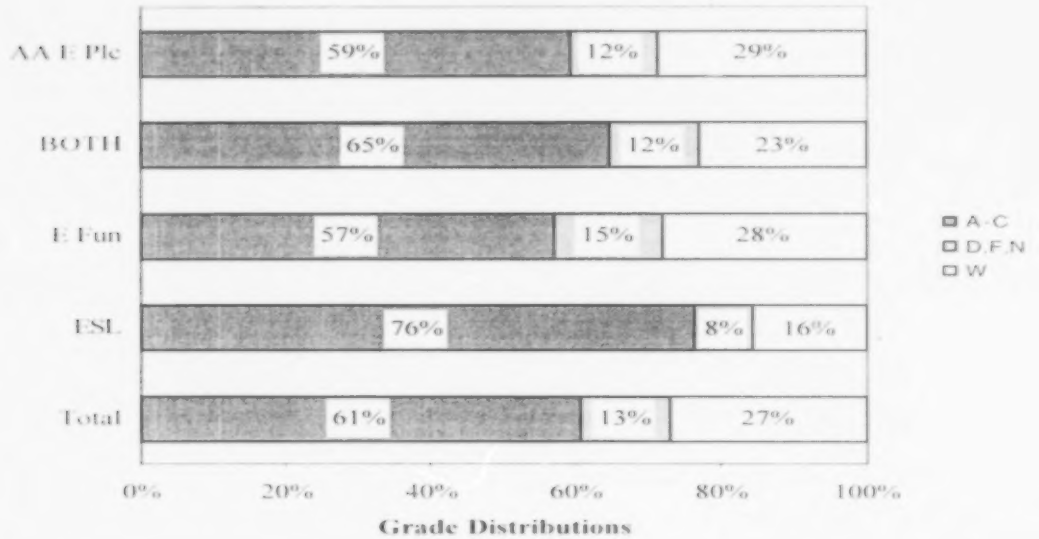


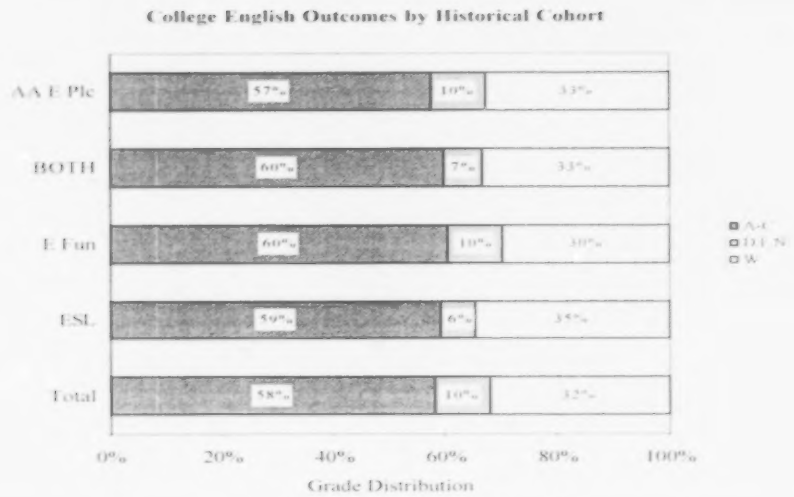
Table 5 displays the GPA's of students in the same four cohorts taking College English. However, AA E Placement also includes students who entered College 1 or 2 at the College English level. This change is indicated by labeling the cohort "AA E+ Placement". Again, the ESL group achieved the highest GPA in College English. At this level of English, however, we found that the two cohorts of ESL and Both were more likely to succeed than those students coming from AA E through placement or placed directly into College English. (Future study will attempt to separate this cohort further into two groups.) Although the percentages have become quite small in proportion to the total College English students, the findings of College English evaluation supports the AA level English course conclusions.

It may also be noted that the range of mean GPA's remains the same between cohorts in AA English and College English. The range for College 1 was 0.36 on both tables, and the range for College 2 was 0.50 on both tables.

Table 5. College English GPA and Percents by Cohort (Historical Tracking)

Instructional History:	College 1 % (N)	College 2 % (N)	College 1& 2 % of Total	College 1 AA E GPA	College 2 AA E GPA
AA E+ Placement	64%	79%	73%	2.68	2.76
ESL only	06%	01%	03%	2.79	3.00
E Fun only	26%	18%	21%	2.43	2.53
Both ESL & E Fun	04%	02%	02%	2.71	2.81
Total	100% (914)	100% (1527)	100% (2441)	2.62	2.72

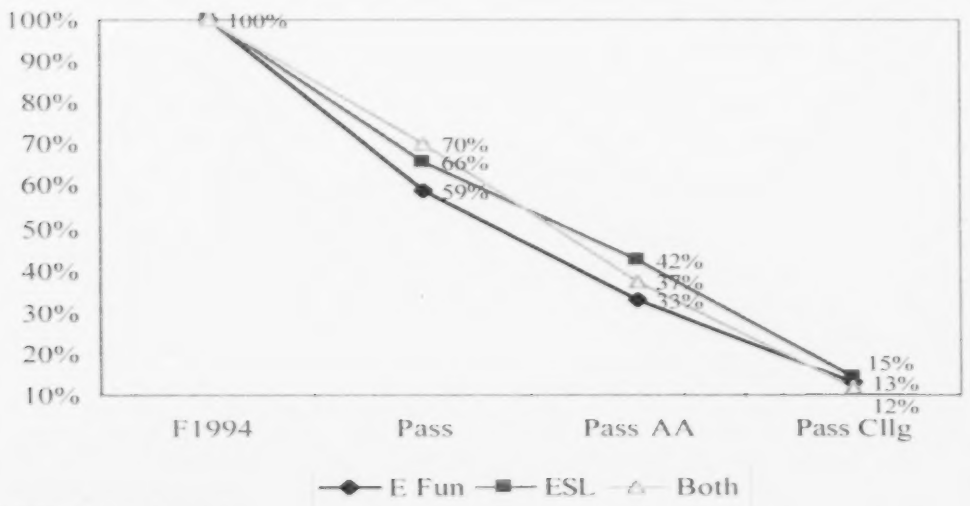
Figure 4.



In accordance with the continuing trend of ESL students to perform better than other cohorts, Figure 4 indicates that ESL students were less likely to fail than other students (6% compared to 10%), but they were likely to succeed at nearly the same rate. The main difference seems to be that students with a history of ESL were more likely to withdraw than other groups. These differences are all quite small at this level.

Figure 5 depicts the three original cohorts of College 1, and compares the passing rates of the original cohort *n* in the initial Fall 1994 class, passing rates in AA English, and finally passing rates in College English. The drastic losses of students able to successfully complete this transition from lower levels of English into AA English (required for graduation) and College English (required for transfer) led the researchers to christen these rates as "survival rates". It tells a story of stamina and persistence by a small percentage of students. The figure also shows the similarities of the three groups.

Figure 5: English Survival Rates of Different College-Preparatory Cohorts



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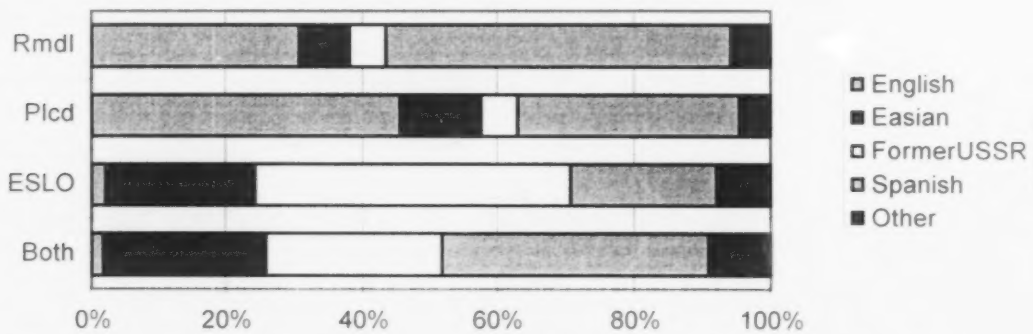
Are ESL students the problem? NO. There are other factors.

We have begun examining issues that may lead to further understanding of the factors of success for ESL and basic skills students. Using the same cohorts developed previously, factors such as enrollment by language of origin, age, and course-taking patterns are being examined. The following figures and table display some of the information gained thus far.

Figure 6 is based on the historical tracking of the four cohorts at College 1 at the AA English level. The enrollment by language of origin for College 1 shows that there are more native Spanish speakers in their remedial or E Fun group than native English speakers. The ESL population at College 1 taking AA English contains more former USSR whites than any other language group. There are nearly equal numbers of native English speakers placed at this level as native Spanish speakers.

Figure 6. College 1 AA-E Enrollment by Language of Origin



In comparison, Figure 7 depicts the language of origin for College 2 AA English. Very few students are from the former USSR. Although College 2 consists of nearly 40% Latinos compared with about 14% Asians, the students in with an ESL only history in AA English were more likely to be Asian than Latino. Since the two colleges are distinctly different with regard to language of origin, yet both show ESL students as most successful, clearly, their success is not dependent on language of origin.

Figure 7. College 2 AA-E Enrollment by Language of Origin

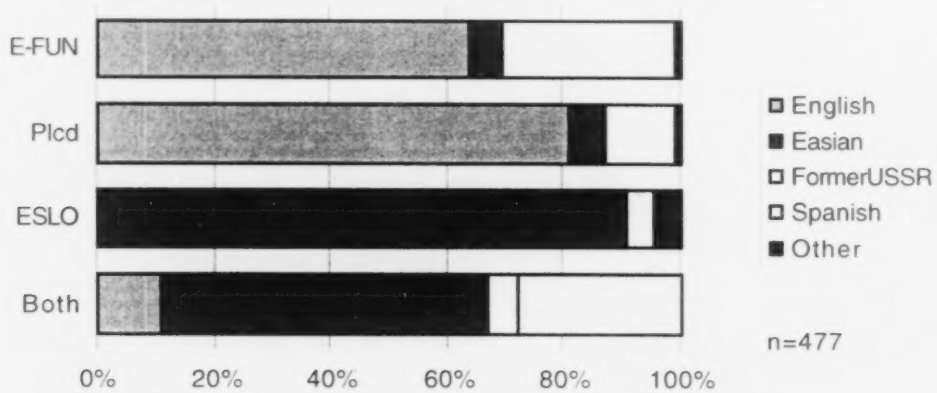
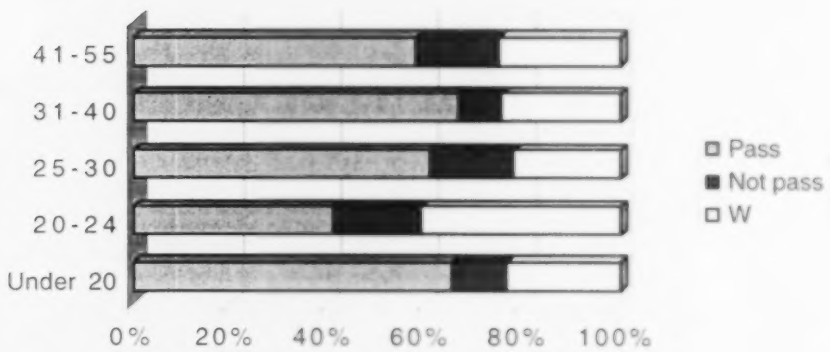


Figure 8 examines the passing and retention rates for AA English by age in the AA-E Placement cohort. Nearly all groups are similar with the exception of the 20-24 year-olds at College 2. This age group was much more likely to withdraw than other age groups. It seems that the students returning to school after a break, but with less life experience that older students, have the most trouble succeeding in AA English. Perhaps this reflects their withdrawal pattern or perhaps this age of student has more difficulty dealing with life issues. Studies in reasons for withdrawal (Thomas-Spiegel, 1997[2]) indicate that work related issues are the primary reason for withdrawal from courses in community college; however, Figure 9 tells a different story.

Figure 8.

AAE Grade by Age for Placed Cohort

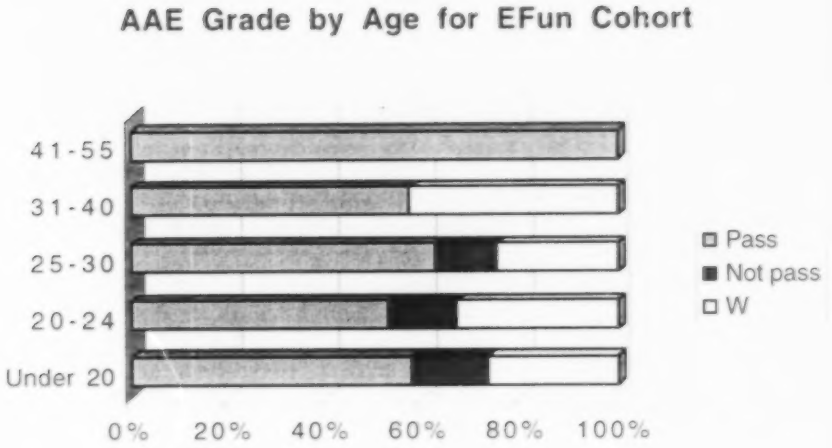


College 2

As shown in Figure 9, the E Fun cohort at College 2 was sorted into age groups to further examine the phenomenon of success by age. In the English fundamental cohort, older students were far more likely to pass. Apparently, students over 30 were able to judge whether they would pass or not and withdrew rather than receive a D or F. Comparing Figures 8 and 9, one might conclude that students taking the course in which they were placed, feel determined to stay in the class and attempt to succeed even when they are unlikely to do so. This implies a trust in the college's placement system that may be unwarranted, since assessment is not a perfect science and students are subjected to many other factors of success. It appears that the student who has completed an English fundamentals course and is older, has learned the realities of college better. Oddly enough, the pattern of 20-24 year olds seen in the placed cohort is not repeated in the E Fun cohort. (One might wonder whether disproportionate impact with regard to age in placement testing is undesirable or a valid multiple measure.)

[2] ERIC publication: Thomas-Spiegel, Joan. "Increasing Instructor and Student Communication Through Drop Notice Surveys" Los Angeles Harbor College, Wilmington, CA. 17 April 1997.

Figure 9. College 2



We can track Partnership for Excellence basic skills progression. Can we improve it?

A final question the researchers sought to answer revolves around the question of basic skills students' progression through college. We have learned that we can track such progression relatively easily using the SAS tracking method developed by Dr. Dillon. However, the charge of Partnership for Excellence is to improve this progression. Since basic skills students (E Fun) were the least likely group to succeed in the next level of English, the need to improve their progress is clear. The likelihood of attaining that improvement is much lower.

The direction of future study by the researchers is toward increasing our understanding of basic skills students now that we have separated the issues of ESL from the E Fun cohort. As we begin this journey, Table 6 indicates the pattern of course taking outside of English, based on the initial English course taken at College 1. One can determine that students entering at the English Fundamentals level are far less likely to have a direction of study. Students entering at the AA E level are more likely to take courses in liberal arts and sciences or business. The entering College English level student appears to be primarily oriented toward transfer as indicated by the high percentage of liberal arts and sciences courses. It may be noted that over 40% of College 1's students entered at the E Fun level. Course patterns are listed in order of the greatest to least by this largest percentage of students. The row percents display the overall course taking patterns at College 1.

Table 6. Course-taking Patterns by Program Area by Initial English at College 1

	Initial English Level			ROW	ROW
PROGRAM AREA	E Fun %	AA E %	College E %	TOTAL N	Percents
None identified	36.4	14.8	11.2	1135	23.0%
Business	15.7	18.9	10.2	780	15.8%
Health	11.1	9.4	8.7	491	9.9%
Liberal Arts & Sciences	9.6	23.0	38.1	1014	20.5%
Public Affairs	5.9	11.5	11.7	455	9.2%
Family/Consumer Sci	5.7	5.4	2.4	243	4.9%
Industrial Arts	3.6	6.0	3.3	219	4.4%
Education	2.3	0.6	0.5	64	1.3%
Fine & Applied Arts	1.8	1.3	1.0	71	1.4%
Computer & Info Sci	1.6	1.1	0.6	59	1.2%
Media Arts	1.4	2.0	1.6	83	1.7%
Mathematics	1.0	0.9	0.6	43	0.9%
Architecture/Design	0.9	0.7	3.6	68	1.4%
Law/Paralegal	0.8	1.0	1.8	52	1.1%
Music	0.7	0.9	0.6	37	0.7%
Foreign Language	0.5	0.3	0.4	20	0.4%
Dramatic Arts	0.3	0.6	1.1	30	0.6%
Humanities	0.3	0.7	0.3	21	0.4%
Physical Sciences	0.2	0.5	0.9	23	0.5%
Life Sciences	0.2	0.1	0.1	6	0.1%
Psychology	0.1	0.2	0.5	10	0.2%
Social Sciences	0.0	0.3	0.9	15	0.3%
other	0.0	0.1	0.0	1	0.0%
TOTAL N	2044	1888	1008	4940	100.0%
COLUMN Percents	41.4%	38.2%	20.4%	100.0%	

In conclusion, we plan to continue our examination of these cohorts as we track the progress of students into local four-year transfer institutions. Current accountability models often approach retention, persistence, and success as college report cards. In reality, these issues are multi-dimensional and the ability to increase student success in these areas rests on our ability to understand the interplay of diverse factors. In addition, some areas are independent variables. Unlike four-year or private institutions, community colleges cannot improve these rates by restricting access to the college. Nor would it be desirable, since the community college mission is to provide open access and further education for all who desire it. As we continue our study in this area, we hope to discover various factors that may be targeted in orientation, personal development courses, and program courses to assist specific groups of students to increase their success in college. However, rather than focusing on those areas that the accountability agencies desire, such as transfer rates and retention rates (especially if without consideration to successful retention), which clearly serve the smallest of the community college population, we plan to continue to focus on basic skills students as a group and in comparison with other groups.